Chapter Five

WARREN'S FINGERS SLOWED, lingering on the final chord as though releasing it too quickly might cause it to vanish, or worse, betray the truth he hadn't meant to spill. The notes shimmered in the lobby air, vibrating off the polished floors, tangling with the muted laughter and smell of alcohol drifting from the bar. For a moment, he felt hollow. Spent. As if everything he had spent months – years – tamping down had just poured out of him in a flood too powerful to stop.

He leaned back slightly, shoulders aching, lungs struggling to catch up. His body trembled with the aftermath. A tsunami, he thought. That's what it felt like. A tidal wave surging through the neat, careful dams he had built around himself, ripping them apart, leaving only raw silence behind.

And then the hairs at the back of his neck prickled. That ancient instinct: being watched.

Warren lifted his gaze.

Across the room, just outside the wash of the lobby lights, stood a woman. Auburn hair tumbled in waves past her shoulders, catching hints of gold beneath the chandeliers. Her eyes; pale blue, piercing, were locked onto him with a kind of reverence he didn't know what to do with. It wasn't the idle glance of someone passing through, nor the bored politeness of a hotel guest stumbling onto free entertainment.

Her stare was different. Intent. Almost… haunted. Like she was gazing not at a stranger, but at something half-remembered, lost, and suddenly recovered in the unlikeliest of places.

Warren's throat tightened. His hands hovered uselessly above the keys, the silence between them humming louder than the music had. He'd spent years playing in shadows, hiding his voice where no one could really hear. Yet

here was someone, this woman, standing still as stone, as if the notes had stripped her bare in the same way they had him.

His breath caught. He felt it: not the shallow applause of an audience, but the dangerous, fragile recognition of being truly *seen*.

Warren blinked, unsure if he should break the silence, but the woman moved first. Slowly, deliberately, she stepped closer, her gaze never leaving his. The moderate din of noise from the bar faded into nothing.

"That was…" She stopped a few feet away, searching for the right word. Her voice was soft, edged with awe. "…beautiful."

Heat rose to Warren's face. He wasn't used to being caught like this, laid bare at the keys. He gave a nervous laugh and shifted on the bench. "Thanks. Just… messing around."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, like she didn't believe him. "That didn't sound like messing around. That sounded like," she hesitated, then leaned in a little, "someone telling the truth."

The words hit him harder than he expected. No one had ever said that about his music. Not even Lacey, who'd begged him to let her listen.

He cleared his throat, trying to recover. "Well… it's nothing, really. Just a hobby."

She tilted her head, a smile tugging at her lips, though her eyes stayed serious. "If that's a hobby, I'd hate to see what you call passion."

Warren couldn't help it; he smiled back, sheepish but intrigued. There was something disarming about her presence, as though she saw right through the layers he kept hidden.

"I'm Warren," he said, finally offering the words that had been stuck in his chest and extending his hand to greet her.

She put out her hand, her fingers delicate but sure. "Sarah."

Their hands touched, and for the briefest moment, Warren swore he felt the same current that had rushed through him when he played; the sense that something had shifted, that something had begun.

Sarah glanced at the empty space on the piano bench and then back at him. "Mind if I sit?"

Warren froze. People usually respected his invisible boundary when it came to his music. He never played for anyone, and when people asked, he would politely decline. It was private for him, his own little piece that no one could touch. But this woman didn't just want to hear a piece of him, she wanted to be right there beside it.

He opened his mouth to refuse, the instinctive "I'd rather not" on the tip of his tongue. But something about her, those pale blue eyes that didn't waver, the calm assurance in her posture, made him pause. Against his own pattern, he nodded. "Sure."

She slid onto the bench, careful not to crowd him, her presence light but impossible to ignore. "Play something else," she said softly, almost like a challenge.

Warren chuckled nervously, rubbing the back of his neck. "I don't really take requests."

"This isn't a request," Sarah replied, her lips curling into a half-smile. "It's me asking you to let me hear whatever else you've been hiding."

The words sank deep. Usually, that kind of probing would have made him shut down, but instead he felt… safe. Curious, even.

His fingers hovered over the keys, hesitant for just a beat, then surrendered. A new melody unfurled, quieter, gentler, carrying with it a tenderness he didn't realize had been waiting to surface.

Sarah closed her eyes, letting the notes wash over her. She leaned just enough for her shoulder to brush his arm, not on purpose, but not entirely by accident either.

Warren didn't flinch at the contact. He just kept playing, and just then, it felt like sharing that piece of him he had kept hidden all these years.

When the last note faded, Sarah opened her eyes and turned to him. "See?" she whispered. "That's not nothing. That's you."

Warren met her gaze, a strange, unguarded warmth stirring in his chest. He didn't know what this was or why it felt so different, but he knew one thing: he didn't want the moment to end.

Warren let his hands rest on the keys, the lingering vibration of the last chord humming faintly in the air. He exhaled, realizing he'd been holding his breath.

Sarah tilted her head, studying him with that same unshakable gaze. "So, Warren-who-claims-this-is-'just-a-hobby'… what are you really doing here?"

He gave a small laugh. "Conference. Urban planning. A week of seminars, PowerPoints, and handshakes. Nothing glamorous."

Her brows arched. "Urban planning? That's… very different from this." She gestured at the piano.

"Yeah," he admitted, shrugging. "Planning is what pays the bills. This," he tapped the keys lightly, "this is just how I keep myself sane."

Sarah smiled knowingly. "Funny. For me, it's the opposite. Music is supposed to be the career. The stage, the late nights, the gigs in smoky bars. That's how I keep the bills barely paid."

He glanced sideways at her, intrigued. "Singer?"

"Mm-hm." She leaned back slightly, crossing one leg over the other, her auburn hair spilling across her shoulder. "Mostly local clubs. I've been told I've got the voice, but…" She trailed off, her expression flickering. "Something's missing. Can't quite pin it down."

Warren felt a spark of recognition; like they were circling the same truth from opposite directions. He didn't know why, but he wanted to bridge the silence. "Maybe you just haven't found the right… sound," he said carefully.

Her eyes lit up, as if he'd stumbled too close to something she'd been holding back. She leaned in, lowering her voice. "Maybe I just haven't found the right person to play it with me."

Warren's pulse quickened. He wasn't sure if she meant it as flirtation or as truth, or both, but the weight of it hung in the space between them.

He cleared his throat, retreating slightly into humor. "Well, if you're looking for an urban planner with limited stage presence, I might be your guy."

Sarah laughed, the sound light and melodic, cutting through the tension. But when her eyes returned to his, they still held that intensity, the sense that she saw more in him than he usually let anyone see.

Before either of them could say more, Sarah's phone rang, snapping the moment back into the larger world. Sarah pulled the phone out of her pocket then glanced down at it, then back at him. It was Kyle, calling her at the most inopportune time.

"Do you need to get that?" Warren asked.

"No, it's just someone I don't feel like talking to right now. It can go to voicemail." After she hit decline, the silence lingered between them until Sarah felt a little awkward and decided it was probably time to walk away for the time being.

"I should probably…" she gestured vaguely, "…find my roommate before she thinks I ditched her."

Warren nodded, though a surprising pang of disappointment settled in his chest.

Sarah rose gracefully from the bench, but before she left, she leaned down slightly, her voice brushing close to his ear. "Don't disappear before I get the chance to hear more."

And then she was gone, her figure weaving into the crowd, leaving Warren at the piano with his hands hovering uselessly over the keys, unsure if he'd just imagined the entire thing. Her vanilla perfume lingered long after she left. The lobby carried on as if nothing had happened, footsteps across the tile, the background hum of the bar, the low murmur of distant conversations.

But inside him, something stirred.

He wasn't sure if it was her laugh, the way her eyes had seemed to look straight through him, or the strange ease he'd felt letting her sit beside him. Whatever it was, it left him with the uncanny sense that he'd just stepped into a song he hadn't realized was waiting to be written.

Warren leaned back, staring at the polished black lid of the piano. For years, music had been his secret world, something private, untouchable. Yet in

a single moment, with a stranger's voice and presence, that world suddenly felt less like a hiding place and more like a doorway.

He shook his head, trying to convince himself it was just the drinks, the social fatigue, the mood of the evening. But when he closed his eyes, he could still see her, standing there as though she'd known him all along.

Warren didn't feel entirely certain of where his life was headed.

And he couldn't tell if that thought terrified him…or thrilled him.